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THE MISSING FORMULA
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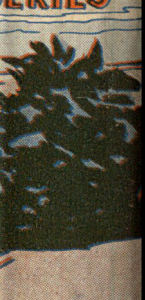
THE GOLDSMITH PUBLISHING COMPANY
Chicago, Ill.

THE SECRET OF THE SUNDIAL

BY ANN WIRT

THE MADGE STERLING SERIES



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The Secret of The Sundial

ANN WIRT

THE SECRET OF THE SUNDIAL

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THE SECRET OF THE SUNDIAL

CHAPTER I

An Initiation

On a certain evening in early September—Friday the thirteenth—to be exact, a stranger in Claymore, Michigan, might have been startled to behold two figures, grotesque in long white sheets which draped them from head to foot, scurrying along an alley leading to Summit Street. It was an appropriate night for ghosts to be abroad. The moon was in the dark and the wind whistled weirdly through the trees.

The two figures moved stealthily along the boxwood hedge which bordered the rear of the George Brady property. Presently, coming to an opening barely large enough to squeeze through, they paused, glancing hastily in all directions.

"The coast is clear!" one murmured in a low tone.

"Surely you don't expect me to crawl through that tiny hole!" came the indignant protest. "I'm not the bean-pole you are, Jane Allen. What's the sense of all this secrecy anyhow? Why can't we go in the main entrance?"

"I suppose you want everyone to see you!" the other retorted. "What's the use of having a secret society if it isn't secret?"

The second "ghost" silently acknowledged the weight of this argument and permitted herself to be pushed toward the opening in the hedge. Half way through, her sheet caught. In her efforts to free herself, it tore.

"Mother's best sheet!" she groaned. "Won't I catch it when I get home!"

"Hurry up!" the other urged with callous indifference to the fate which might await her friend. "We mustn't be late for the initiation."

They moved swiftly across the lawn, noting that the large white house was entirely dark. They paused at a side door and knocked three times.

Almost instantly the door opened and a third ghost confronted them.

"Everyone is here now except Cara Wayne," she informed, "and of course we don't want her until we're all ready for the initiation. Aunt Maude and Uncle George went to a bridge party tonight so we have the house to ourselves."

She led them through darkened halls to an attic "clubroom" where an oil lamp dimly burned.

"We may as well take off these hot sheets until Cara comes," she invited. "We can slip them on again when we hear her at the door."

By way of example, she tossed off her own disguise and stood revealed as Madge Sterling, president of the Skull and Crossbones, a most exclusive secret society. She was an attractive girl, vivacious and distinctly a leader. Her laughter was infectious; without half trying she had a way of drawing friends to her. Older people said she had "tact" but girls her own age liked her because she was known as a good sport. Madge's mother was dead, and since the disappearance of her father, she had made her home with her aunt and uncle, Mr. and Mrs. Brady.

The two newcomers were Jane Allen and Edna Raynard. Jane was homely and very outspoken; she made enemies easily yet was a loyal friend. She did not mind her straight black hair or somewhat muddy complexion. Her slender figure was often ridiculed, but she took it all in good fun. Edna was quite the opposite. She was pretty as a picture, plump, and had an inclination toward taking life exactly as she found it.

The other girl, Enid Burnett, was Madge's special chum. Largely through Madge's influence, she had been induced to come from another state to attend the Everetts School for Girls at Claymore. Her mother also was dead, and her father, a well-to-do collector and sportsman, permitted her an unusual amount of freedom. Notwithstanding,

she was a quiet, unspoiled girl with a genuine liking for school and studies.

"Is everything all set for the initiation, Madge?" Jane inquired.

"Yes, Enid and I fixed up the basement this afternoon. We didn't dare let Aunt Maude know what we were about for fear she'd put a stop to it. Wait until Cara steps into the tub of water! We bought a nice big piece of quivery liver too that—"

She broke off as three loud knocks sounded from below, and made a dive for her sheet. The others scrambled into their costumes, preparing to follow her downstairs.

"Remember, girls, don't speak a word until Cara is brought up here," she warned in a whisper. "This initiation must be a very solemn affair."

"Have you thought up the main stunt?" Edna asked anxiously. "I tried to think up something but couldn't."

"Don't worry, I have a hair raiser!" Madge chuckled.

She led the procession down the stairs. The girls lined up on either side of the door and then Madge opened it to confront a very frightened little girl who awaited admittance in fear and trembling. She giggled nervously as Madge beckoned her to follow.

Cara Wayne was conducted by a devious route

through the dark house to the basement stairs. Madge signified that she was to go down alone. Cara hesitated, sensing that some unpleasant ordeal awaited her below, but there was no escape. She went boldly down. Suddenly, the girls heard a little squeal of fright.

"She must have touched the liver," Enid whispered. "I hung it where she couldn't miss it."

Next there was a loud crash as Cara stepped into an empty packing box.

"I hope she doesn't miss the tub of water," Madge murmured anxiously.

Cara did not disappoint them. A minute later they heard a great splash and a howl of anguish. Since the water ordeal exhausted the possibilities of the basement, Enid was sent down to bring up the unhappy victim. Cara was drenched to the knees but she displayed a studied cheerfulness. They led her to the attic clubroom, seating themselves in a semi-circle about her.

"Cara Wayne, do you promise never to reveal anything which transpires here this night?" Madge asked in a deep, sepulchre-like voice.

There was a long silence and then Cara's quavering: "I do."

"And will you obey any command given you during the next week by any illustrious member of Skull and Crossbones?"

"I will," Cara promised, visions of many detested tasks passing before her eyes.

"And now, one last test of your courage remains to be made," Madge continued impressively. "It lacks twenty minutes of midnight. Exactly upon the hour you must go to the old boarded-up Swenster mansion, bringing back some token to prove that you have accomplished your mission."

For a minute Cara looked as though she intended to refuse, and in truth, the others could not have blamed her. The old Swenster mansion was several doors away, adjoining a grove of pine trees which at night was not the most pleasant place to pass. The Swenster grounds were surrounded by a high fence and hedge which hid the house from view of the street. The place had been closed for years.

"I don't know how I can get into the grounds," Cara protested.

"You can go in the back way," Madge informed, forgetting her pose and speaking in a natural voice. "It will take you some time to reach there, so you had better start now."

Cara looked very unhappy but she knew that to refuse might mean her dismissal from the organization to which she aspired. Reluctantly, she made her way down the dark stairs. The outside door closed behind her.

"That was an inspiration!" Enid praised after Cara had gone. "Madge, you have such clever ideas! I didn't think she'd do it, did you?"

"Cara's game," Madge laughed. "I'd not enjoy going to the Swenster mansion myself at this time of night."

"You couldn't hire me to go near there," Edna added feelingly. "I can just see poor Cara shaking in her boots. I wonder if she'll be able to get into the grounds."

"The gate at the rear is ajar," Madge returned. "I tested it this afternoon to find out."

For some minutes the girls laughed over the evening's fun. Shortly after midnight they began to expect Cara.

"I wish she'd hurry," Madge said. "Aunt Maude and Uncle George will be coming home soon and that will put an end to the initiation. She's had plenty of time to get back."

At fifteen minutes past midnight, the girls were a little alarmed. They cast off their cumbersome robes and went downstairs to watch for her.

"What can have happened?" Madge worried. "Perhaps we shouldn't have sent her alone."

"She's probably trying to worry us just to get even," Jane insisted.

"I think we'd better go to the Swenster mansion and see what is keeping her," Madge returned

quietly. "Or if you like, I'll go alone. It was my idea in the first place—a bum one I'll admit."

"Wait!" Enid commanded. "I believe she's coming now."

They all turned to look and saw a figure fairly flying down the street toward the house. She hurled herself through the gate and raced across the yard. Before the girls could open the door, she flung herself against it, crying: "Let me in! Let me in!"

As they hurriedly admitted her, she stumbled against Madge, gripping her in a nervous embrace.

"Did you bring the token?" they asked her.

Cara laughed hysterically.

"No, I didn't bring it but I went to the Swenster mansion all right! And I don't care what you say—I'll not go back! Not even if it means staying out of the club. Nothing can make me go near that horrible place again!"

CHAPTER II

Cara's Fright

"IT DOESN'T matter if you didn't bring a token," Madge comforted the shaking Cara. "We'll not make you go back there again. But tell us, what frightened you so?"

"I—I saw a ghost!"

"You must have dreamed it," Jane declared. "I guess you saw so many ghosts during the initiation that you had them on your mind."

Cara shook her head stubbornly.

"No, I didn't dream this. I saw something white moving around in the Swenster yard—I don't know what it could have been if it wasn't a ghost!"

Madge switched on the living room lights and led Cara to a chair. The girls were disturbed to see that she was pale. No one doubted that her fright was genuine.

"Cara Wayne, you know very well that ghosts don't exist," Madge said sternly. "Now tell us exactly what happened."

"Well, I went to the old mansion as I was told

to do. I went around the back way and found the gate ajar. Believe me, I wasn't very keen to go inside, but I made myself do it. No sooner had I stepped inside than I saw the thing—oh, it was awful!"

"What did it look like?" Edna demanded.

"I just saw something white and a face—it frightened me so I turned and ran. I made it back here in about thirty seconds flat."

"What was your so called ghost doing in the Swenster yard?" Madge questioned curiously.

"Digging with a shovel!"

Until now the girls had been impressed with Cara's story although they took no stock in ghosts, but this announcement called forth gales of laughter in which all joined save Madge. She had begun to think that perhaps Cara's fright was based upon something more substantial than imagination. She kept the thought to herself.

"You must have been seeing things!" Jane scoffed.

"Well, if you don't believe me, go there yourself and find out!" Cara challenged.

Madge tactfully put an end to the argument by suggesting that refreshments be served.

"We've all had enough initiation for one night," she said. "I vote that without further ceremony we make Cara a full-fledged member of the club."

The others unanimously agreed. Cara breathed a deep sigh of relief as she realized that it was all over. Madge and Enid went to the kitchen to dish up ice cream and cake. Everyone was very sweet to Cara, trying to atone for the unpleasant events of the evening. She bore no one a grudge and soon was able to laugh at her own experience.

Before the girls had finished their ice cream, Mr. and Mrs. Brady returned home from the bridge party.

"Remember, not a word about what happened," Jane warned as footsteps were heard on the porch.

Mr. and Mrs. Brady greeted the girls cordially. Themselves youthful in spirit, they enjoyed the society of young people and never objected when Madge overran the house with her friends. If they noticed that Cara looked pale and slightly ill at ease, they made no mention of it.

A few minutes later the girls departed, gratefully accepting Mr. Brady's offer to drive them home in his car. Madge had hoped to speak alone with Cara before she left, but the opportunity did not present itself.

"I'll see her tomorrow at school," she thought. "I mean to find out more about what happened tonight at the Swenster mansion. Cara isn't the sort to be frightened over nothing. I'm inclined to think something queer may be going on there."

Madge had a certain instinct for adventure; her many thrilling experiences were the envy of her friends. Each summer she was privileged to spend many pleasant months at her uncle's fishing lodge at Loon Lake, Canada. There she had met Jack French, a young forest ranger, who had taken more than an ordinary interest in her. Her friendship for an orphan, Anne Fairaday, had plunged her into a baffling search for a valuable paper. The story of this interesting adventure is related in the first volume of the Madge Sterling series, entitled *"The Missing Formula."*

More recently, she had been involved in a strange kidnapping case. Arriving at Cheltham Bay to visit her friend Enid, she had found the Burnett yacht abandoned. In trying to discover what became of Mr. Burnett she was brought into dangerous contact with a fanatical group of Zudi Drum worshipers. This story is recounted in the volume *"The Deserted Yacht."*

"I've often wondered why the Swenster mansion has been kept boarded up all these years," Madge reflected as she undressed for bed. "It must have been quite a show place at one time."

She was still thinking of the old estate when she tumbled into bed. Perhaps Cara's tale of "ghosts" had disturbed her more than she knew for her dreams were of the wildest sort. It seemed

to her that she had slept half the night when she was awakened by a loud cry from the basement. Actually, she had been asleep only a few minutes.

"What was that?" she asked herself nervously, sitting up in bed. "I hope it isn't a burglar!"

The sound was not repeated but she could hear something banging about in the basement. After a moment of indecision she decided to investigate. Slipping into her bathrobe, she stole softly down the stairway. She could hear someone coming up the basement steps and scarcely knew whether to retreat or stand her ground.

Suddenly the cellar door was flung open and Uncle George stomped angrily into the kitchen.

"Say, who left a tub of water at the foot of the stairs?" he demanded crossly. "Look at me!"

The sight struck Madge as extremely funny and she made the mistake of laughing.

"If this is your idea of a joke—" Mr. Brady began threateningly.

Madge hastily assured him that the tub of water had not been intended for him, but it was some time before she could clear herself. She finally coaxed him into a better humor and left him foraging contentedly in the refrigerator.

The next day she did not forget her resolution to question Cara Wayne. During algebra class, when the teacher's back was turned, she passed a

note, asking Cara to wait for her after school.

"I want you to tell me more about the Swenster ghost," Madge commanded as they linked arms and started away from the building.

"Oh, dear, I suppose I'll never hear the last of it," Cara sighed. "I'm willing to admit it couldn't have been a ghost, but there was somebody in that yard!"

"I have a splendid idea!" Madge confided, watching her friend mischievously. "Let's go to the old mansion now and see what we can discover."

Cara shrank away.

"No, thanks. I don't care for the place."

"It's broad daylight," Madge insisted. "And remember, for a week you're supposed to obey the commands of any member of Skull and Crossbones."

"Oh, all right," Cara submitted unwillingly, "but I don't see what you expect to find there."

Madge did not respond. In truth, she could not have told what she hoped to learn. It was pure intuition that had inspired the little adventure. Turning down Summit Street, she urged Cara to a faster pace.

"Don't look so glum," she protested gayly. "It will be fun! Before we're through, I'll warrant you'll be glad I brought you along!"

CHAPTER III

The Swenster Mansion

THE Swenster mansion was a large, rambling affair, set back some distance from the other modern dwellings on Summit Street. A high, untrimmed hedge at the front and large evergreen trees hid the grounds from view. The windows had been boarded up for years and most persons could not recall when the house had been occupied. It had fast fallen into decay. Shutters dangled loosely on rusty hinges, weeds choked the lawn, everything needed paint. Yet, with the passing years, the old mansion had retained something of its former elegance.

Madge and Cara paused briefly to survey the place from the front, then walked swiftly around to the rear.

"We may get into trouble if we're caught trespassing," Cara ventured timidly.

"No danger of that when the owner hasn't been heard from in years," Madge returned, undisturbed. She rattled the back gate and was surprised to find it locked. "That's queer. It was

unfastened yesterday afternoon when I stopped."

"It wasn't locked last night," Cara added with growing uneasiness. "Let's not try to get in."

Madge was not to be so easily discouraged.

"We can climb over easy as scat!" she declared.

"But if someone should see us?"

"Let them. At the worst, we can only be run out. Come on."

She swung over the fence with an ease which her friend could not hope to duplicate. Still protesting, Cara permitted herself to be helped over.

Madge looked about the grounds with keen interest. A winding walk led to a tangled, overgrown rose garden. She saw a tiny cement pool, clogged with old dead leaves and sticks. Beyond, a sundial of peculiar design and construction, attracted her attention.

"Isn't it quaint!" she exclaimed admiringly. "Let's see if we can tell what time it is."

"I know I can't," Cara insisted. "I never could make head nor tail of them."

The dial rested upon a concrete pedestal which reached waist high when the girls stood beside it. Upon the brass face appeared slightly raised Roman numerals and the triangular gnomon cast its shadow across the four.

"It's just a little after four o'clock," Madge announced.

"That's a safe guess," Cara laughed. "You know school lets out at ten till."

"You don't need to guess with a sundial such as this. Half of them won't tell time accurately. That's because they're turned out at the factory and sent all over the country. To be accurate a sundial must be made especially for the section where it is used."

"This one does look home made," Cara acknowledged. "It's nice work though."

Madge would have enjoyed wandering about in the garden but she could tell that her friend was eager to get away. Reluctantly, she gave her attention to the matter which had drawn her to the mansion.

"Tell me where it was that you saw your ghost," she commanded.

"It wasn't a dozen paces from where we're standing. Someone was digging here in the garden."

For the first time Madge carefully studied the ground. She paused a short distance from the sundial.

"There's loose earth here," she announced, stirring it with the toe of her shoe. "I guess you were right about seeing someone."

"Certainly I was right. I hope you don't think I'm afraid of my shadow."

"Of course not, Cara. I wonder who could have been digging here and for what purpose?"

"Maybe someone was burying a dead cat."

Madge shook her head and smiled.

"Folks don't go to other people's yards to bury their pets. Think of a better reason."

"Gold!" Cara cried promptly. "Perhaps there's a treasure hidden here."

"I'd like to think so, but I'm afraid that only happens in story books. Cara, what did your ghost do when he saw you?"

"I don't think he saw me at all. Anyway, I didn't wait long enough to find out."

Madge examined the loose earth but as she had no implement with which to dig, was unable to tell whether or not anything had been buried. Cara displayed slight interest and moved away. Madge completely forgot her until she came back dragging a spade.

"Here, if you must dig around in the dirt, use this."

Madge seized upon the tool, demanding to know where it had been discovered.

Cara indicated a large lilac bush only a few feet away. "I found it beneath the branches."

"This must be the shovel your ghost was using last night! See, there's a little dirt still on it. If it had been lying there long, it would be rusty.

Cara, I'll wager a cent—a good Indian cent—that you frightened someone away from here last evening."

"Then it was mutual."

"Perhaps the person who hid this shovel intends to come back again," Madge went on reflectively. "Now what I can't understand is why anyone would come to a boarded-up mansion at midnight to dig up the garden."

Cara, who was not particularly imaginative, could not suggest a possible explanation. She watched with hopeful interest as her friend began to turn up the loose earth. After Madge had dug for fifteen minutes she decided it was not worth the effort.

"Shucks! I'm convinced there's nothing hidden here. And if anyone should find us digging up the yard it might be hard to explain."

She carefully repacked the soil in the hole, and then to Cara's wonderment, returned the spade to the place where it had been found under the lilac.

"Why take such pains?" she asked.

"Because I don't want your 'ghost' to know we've used his spade," Madge explained. "I'm curious to learn what there is worth digging for in this yard. I mean to find out too!"

"Just how do you propose to go about it?" Cara questioned skeptically.

"Oh, by keeping my eyes and ears open. You can tell that whoever was here last night didn't care to be observed. It's my opinion he'll come back to do some more digging."

"Well, if he does, the occasion will be conspicuous for my absence," Cara declared feelingly.

She glanced at her wrist watch and flashed it before her friend's eyes.

"Do you see what time it is? I must be getting home."

Madge gazed regretfully toward the boarded-up house and wished that she might at least peep inside to see what secrets it guarded. It would be relatively simple to pry loose a board, but of course she had no intention of ever doing that. As it was, she felt somewhat guilty because she had trespassed.

She followed Cara to the gate and after looking about to see that the alley was deserted, climbed over. They walked thoughtfully toward their homes, parting at the Wayne residence.

"Better keep this little affair under your hat," Madge advised. "If you do, we may be able to have some fun out of it."

"Trust me," Cara promised. "But if you're planning any midnight visits to the mansion or anything of the kind, count me out."

Madge laughed and turned away. Already she

was planning another trip to the old mansion, but she thought it wise not to mention it just yet.

"It behooves me to learn a few facts about the Swensters before I jump to hasty conclusions," she told herself, as she continued home. "Between now and my next visit, I must unearth the family history."

CHAPTER IV

The Swenster Pearls

SCHOOL did not keep the following day, and early afternoon found Madge and Cara camped on the Brady front porch, comparing notes.

"I couldn't learn a thing about the Swenster mansion except that it's owned by an old lady who hasn't been near the place in years," the latter confessed regretfully.

"My luck wasn't a great deal better," Madge admitted. "However, I did find out the name of a woman who may be able to tell us what we want to know. Her name is Hilda Grandale."

"Haven't I heard of her before?"

"Probably. She's a real old lady—eighty or ninety. She is reputed to know all the old residents of the town and their histories. In her day she was considered quite a belle."

"Where does she live?"

"That's the catch. She moved to the country a few years ago. She's living on a farm with her sister. It's in Cahoun county."

"Then we'll have to scratch her off our list."

"Oh, I don't know. Uncle George might be persuaded to loan us his coupe. We could drive out there in a couple of hours."

The idea seemed an excellent one so the girls went to search for Mr. Brady. They found him in the back yard washing the car. With shrewd calculation they snatched up rags and aided him in polishing the nickel work. Mr. Brady eyed them somewhat suspiciously and was not surprised when Madge inquired: "By the way, Uncle George, will you need your old hack for a few hours?"

"Just for that, I'll not let you have it," he told her sternly, but the next minute he smiled and turned over the keys.

Madge backed the coupe out the driveway, missed a telephone pole by scant inches, and sped down the street. She took a main highway out of the city and soon was in open country. Having previously inquired the way, she thought they would have no difficulty in finding the farmhouse where Hilda Grandale lived. Soon after the speedometer registered thirty miles, Cara spied the name for which they searched upon a roadside mailbox.

The gate was open and they drove into the barn yard. Squawking chickens darted to safety and a flock of geese waddled off hissing their protest. The commotion proclaimed their approach, and as

the girls halted the car, a woman peered out the kitchen door. She hastily straightened her hair and came down the walk to meet them.

Madge stated their mission, saying that they wished to visit Mrs. Grandale.

"I'm not sure Mother is awake," the woman returned doubtfully. "She usually takes a nap about this time. But if she's up I know she'll be glad to see you. She does enjoy company and so few people ever get out this far."

She led the girls to the house, seating them in a prim, old fashioned living room. They begged her not to disturb Mrs. Grandale, but she went upstairs, returning to say that her mother was awake and would be down shortly.

In a few minutes, the old lady came slowly down the stairs. She was dressed in severe black, with a long full skirt which swept the floor, and wore a white lace cap. Her face was wrinkled and sunken but her eyes were as bright as those of a young girl. She beamed kindly upon Madge and Cara as they arose to greet her. They did not offer to help her to a chair for they guessed that she was proud of her ability to get around by herself.

"Let me see, do I know your names?" she inquired, studying their faces intently. "You're not the Sterling girl, are you?"

"Yes, I am," Madge acknowledged in astonish-

ment. She never before had met Mrs. Grandale. "How did you guess?"

"Didn't guess," the old lady cackled in delight. "I could tell those features anywhere. I used to know your father, my dear, and you're the picture of him."

Madge looked a trifle embarrassed at the reference to her father. His name was seldom mentioned in the Brady household although no disgrace was attached to his memory. He had simply disappeared when Madge was a child, and no one had ever heard of him again. Some day she hoped to learn what had taken him away from Claymore, but at the present she preferred that Mrs. Grandale not dwell upon the subject.

She introduced Cara Wayne, and for a time it was next to impossible for the girls to get a word in edgewise, as Mrs. Grandale immediately went into a long monologue on the subject of the Wayne family history. By concerted action they finally managed to switch the subject to the Swenster mansion.

"In my day, it was *the* house of Claymore," Mrs. Grandale declared. "And what a pity that it has fallen into decay! Not that folks didn't say the Swensters would rue the day they built it—it was much too fine for the city even in prosperous times."

"Tell us about the Swensters," Madge encouraged.

"They were a proud family," the old lady ruminated, obviously relishing the tale. "At one time, old Mr. Swenster practically ran the town. His daughters were in society and they thought the world depended upon the swish of their skirts. At least Florence did."

"How many girls were there?" Cara asked.

"Two. Rose and Florence. Rose was the younger and the favorite with her father. She was a pretty thing too. Far too handsome to suit Florence. I think I have a picture somewhere."

"Oh, never mind," Madge said hastily. She was interested in the story which she felt Mrs. Grandale was on the verge of telling, and did not wish her to digress lest she forget.

"What was I saying? Oh, yes, Rose and Florence were rivals and they were both anxious to get their hands on the Swenster pearls."

"I never heard about them," Madge remarked. "Were they valuable?"

"They were reputed to be worth a small fortune. The pearls had been bought abroad generations before and were perfectly matched. They were to be passed down to the eldest daughter."

"Then Florence was to have them," Cara observed.

"According to custom, yes. But that was what caused all the trouble. During his lifetime, old Mr. Swenster permitted the girls to take turns wearing the pearls. They were very jealous of their father's favor in regard to the privilege, or so rumor had it. Florence thought the pearls were hers and resented having her sister even wear them.

"Then Mr. Swenster died and when his will was read, the daughters had the surprise of their lives. It was learned that he had left the pearls to his favorite, Rose."

"That must have stirred up trouble," Madge smiled.

"Yes, Florence considered it a great injustice. She claimed she had been cheated out of her rightful inheritance. For a time, there was a disgraceful fuss."

"Rose kept the pearls?" Madge questioned.

"So it was generally believed, but I doubt if anyone ever knew for certain. The matter was suddenly hushed up."

Mrs. Grandale relapsed into a meditative silence, seeming to forget the girls. Then she said, half to herself: "No one ever saw Rose wear the pearls—that was the odd part of it."

"Were Rose and Florence friends after that?" Cara probed.

"They went about together but it was apparent things were not as should be between two sisters. Everyone said the pearls brought them misfortune. At any rate, Florence died the following year."

"Oh, how dreadful," Cara murmured. "How poor Rose must have felt."

"She dropped out of society after that," Mrs. Grandale returned. "For years, she lived alone at the old mansion and then one day, she up and married."

"She isn't living now, of course?" Madge inquired.

"Oh, no, she died young—shortly after her daughter was born. The little girl was called Agatha. She's the last of the Swenster line now, and they say the estate has dwindled to almost nothing."

"What became of Agatha Swenster?" Cara asked.

"Well, I can't exactly say," the old lady responded, frowning thoughtfully. "She lived in Claymore until eight years ago and then closed up the place because she couldn't afford to keep such a large house open. She went to another town, but where, I can't say."

"You say she's the last of the Swenster line," Madge prompted as Mrs. Grandale appeared to

have ended her story. "She never married?"

"Not to my knowledge. She did have an adopted boy. Let me think—no, I can't recall his name. He turned out badly. Agatha thought a lot of him and folks said it most broke her heart when he got into trouble."

"What did he do?" Cara questioned curiously.

"I can't tell you that. The Swensters always kept their troubles to themselves. I do know that it was something that turned Agatha against him. They separated, and after that she closed up her house. It may have been because of money or perhaps on account of the boy. At any rate, she's having a hard time of it now like as not. She's getting on in years and with no one to support her, it must be trying."

"What do you imagine became of the pearls?" Madge asked suddenly.

The old lady smiled.

"I imagine they were sold years ago."

The girls had learned all there was to know concerning the Swenster mansion and its former occupants, but they lingered a half hour longer, before saying goodbye to Mrs. Grandale. Before they left, her daughter appeared from the kitchen with fresh-baked cake and a cool beverage.

"Delightful people," Cara observed as they drove away. "And did you ever hear anyone more

talkative than Mrs. Grandale? She's a walking encyclopaedia of Claymore's history. Did you learn what you wanted to know, Madge?"

"I learned enough to make me more interested than ever in the old mansion. Strange about those pearls, wasn't it?"

"Yes, they turned out to be a sort of family hoodoo."

"I wonder if they were actually sold?"

Cara stared at her friend in astonishment.

"Why, Mrs. Grandale said they were."

"That was only her opinion," Madge corrected. "Of course, I have no reason for thinking the pearls weren't sold. I was merely wondering."

She relapsed into moody silence and did not broach the subject again during the ride back to Claymore. They had remained at the farmhouse longer than they had planned and it was nearly supper time when they reached the city. Cara requested Madge to drop her off at the Wayne home which was not out of the way.

"Going to be busy tonight?" Madge inquired as she halted the car in front of the Wayne residence.

"No—why?"

"I thought we might do a little sleuthing."

"Something in connection with the Swenster mansion?" Cara demanded suspiciously.

"Yes, I have a notion to go there tonight and watch. It would be fun to see if that man comes back."

"Fun!" Cara snorted. "I have other ideas of amusement. Count me out!"

"Well, if you won't come, I suppose I can get Jane or Enid," Madge said shrewdly.

Cara visibly wavered. She had no desire to go near the Swenster mansion again, but neither could she bear to have Enid or Jane sharing in an adventure which was hers for the taking.

"All right," she gave in. "If I can get away, I'll come."

"Meet me at the pine grove at nine o'clock," Madge directed, as she shifted gears. "And don't fail to come. Something exciting may break!"

CHAPTER V

Madge Turns Sleuth

NINE o'clock found Madge waiting at the pine grove which adjoined the Swenster Mansion. She stationed herself near a street lamp where Cara could not fail to see her. Ten minutes elapsed, then fifteen.

Glancing impatiently at her watch, Madge decided it was useless to wait longer for her friend. Slowly she walked on toward the mansion.

Suddenly she heard a shout from behind, and turned to see Cara running after her. She was out of breath by the time she caught up.

"Sorry to be so late," she apologized. "I was afraid I'd not get away at all. Mother and Dad were going to an ice cream social and didn't see any reason why I shouldn't go along. I'll not dare stay out later than eleven."

"Neither will I. Let's hope something interesting happens before that."

"Just what do you expect?"

"I don't really expect anything, but I'd like very much to learn the identity of your strange ghost."

The girls slipped into a side street leading to the rear of the mansion. They found the gate locked and since they were unable to work the trick catch, were forced to climb over again.

Under the soft, weird light of the moon, the Swenster mansion looked far different than by daylight. Even Madge was willing to admit there was something sinister about the place.

"I wonder if the spade is still here?" she thought aloud.

They found it under the lilac bush, but not in the exact place where they had left it on the previous visit.

"Someone has used it again!" Madge exclaimed. "Oh, I wish we had watched last night!"

"I'm glad we didn't," Cara said nervously. "I'm not keen on watching tonight either."

Madge paid not the slightest attention to her friend's gentle hints that they leave. She surveyed the garden, looking for a suitable hiding place. A huge rhododendron bush offered a possibility and she went over to examine it.

"This will serve nicely," she decided. "We'll be well hidden, and if necessary we can probably slip out the front way without being seen by anyone in the garden."

Cara allowed herself to be dragged under the rhododendron although secretly she felt that it

was a silly and undignified thing to do. She sank down on the ground gingerly, fearing to soil her silk frock.

"Better make yourself comfortable," Madge advised cheerfully. "We're likely to be here a long time."

The prediction came true with a vengeance. Minutes dragged like hours. The girls talked for a time, but soon exhausted all topics of conversation. Their limbs became cramped and they shifted from one position to another. Cara yawned several times and once dozed off for a few minutes.

"Isn't it most eleven?" she asked hopefully. "I must be home by that time."

Madge looked at her watch which she could plainly see under the bright moonlight.

"We've been here only a little more than an hour," she informed. "It's too early to go home yet."

Cara sighed and shifted to a new position. The adventure had lost all its original thrill and terror. It was deadly monotonous to lie there watching for something which likely never would come. Madge cheered her friend with good natured "kidding," but she too was beginning to wonder if they had not wasted the evening.

"Let's go home," Cara said presently. "I don't care what time it is, I've had about enough. Even

the ice cream social would have been more fun than this. I'll be surprised if I can walk in the morning—every muscle in my poor body is lame."

"All right," Madge gave in reluctantly. "I suppose we may as well call it a night. Not much chance—" she broke off, grasping Cara by the hand. "Look!" she whispered tensely. "Someone *is* coming!"

Cara turned her head to gaze toward the rear gate. Cold chills raced down her spine. A man was standing at the fence, and she was certain it was the same person she had seen on the night of the initiation. He wore a white sweater which evidently had been the one thing that had impressed her before. At the time she had been so frightened that it had registered upon her mind as "something white" and she had jumped to the conclusion that a ghost was abroad.

The man looked quickly about in all directions, then unfastened the gate and entered the yard.

"He's been here before all right," Cara whispered, "or he wouldn't know how to get that gate open."

"Sh!" Madge warned.

She had not taken her eyes from the man. He walked directly to the lilac bush and picked up the spade. He was still too far away for her to see his face plainly.

The girls watched breathlessly as he walked slowly into the garden, pausing a short distance from the sundial. They saw him gaze thoughtfully about, and then he began to turn up the earth with his spade.

"He's not digging where he did before," Cara whispered. "I wish he would turn this way so we could see his face."

Again Madge warned her friend to be silent, and they crouched motionless, watching. For perhaps ten minutes the man spaded steadily. Then with an exclamation of impatience, he refilled the hole.

"Is he crazy?" Cara whispered, forgetting the admonition to remain silent.

Madge shook her head to show that the man's actions were a complete mystery to her.

The man rested a few minutes, and with his back still toward the rhododendron bush, then began to excavate another hole, only a few feet from the first one.

"He's searching for something," Madge thought. "But what in the world does he expect to find?"

She was very curious to learn the identity of the stranger and waited patiently until he turned toward her. The light shone full on his face. She had never seen him before.

Madge glanced questioningly at her chum. Cara shook her head in bewilderment. The man was a stranger to her also.

It was growing late and in spite of their keen desire to learn all there was to know, the girls dared remain no longer. They decided to wait until the man's back was turned and attempt to slip around to the front of the house.

"If we're caught, it may not be so nice," Cara whispered nervously.

They awaited their chance and softly crept from under the bush. Scarcely had they emerged than the man straightened, dropping his spade. It was too late to retreat. The girls could only freeze themselves against the foliage, praying that they would not be seen. And at that moment, he turned and looked directly toward the rhododendron bush!

CHAPTER VI

The Unknown Owner

MADGE and Cara felt certain their presence in the garden had been noted, but to their relief, the man looked away again. He rested briefly, then picked up his spade and resumed digging.

"Now!" Madge whispered the instant his back had turned.

They moved noiselessly along the vine-covered wall until they were hidden behind the house.

"I surely thought we were caught that time," Cara said nervously. "What can he be after anyway?"

"I wish I knew. Just our luck to have to rush home at the exciting time! He may not come here again."

The front gate had been locked with padlock and chain, but the girls found a small opening in the side fence and slipped through. They breathed easier as they emerged on the street. It was after eleven o'clock so they ran nearly all the way to their homes.

Madge did not see her friend the following day

which was Sunday. In spite of her vigorous protest, she was herded into a neighbor's car and taken on a picnic which Mr. and Mrs. Brady had promised to attend earlier in the week. School opened as usual on Monday, but Cara failed to appear, and upon calling at the Wayne home that evening, Madge found her ill in bed with a cold.

"I must have caught it from sitting so long on the ground at the Swenster Mansion," Cara declared. "I hope you're not going there again tonight."

Madge had thought that she might, but with Cara unable to accompany her, it scarcely seemed fair. Then too, the old house at night was not the most pleasant place to be alone. She readily promised her friend the little adventure would be postponed.

Cara came to school the following day but her cold had left her in no mood to expose herself to chilling night air. As several days elapsed, Madge's own interest in the mansion waned.

And then on Saturday morning as she was walking to the store for a pound of sugar which Mrs. Brady had forgotten to order, she was startled to observe that the front gate of the Swenster Mansion stood ajar.

"That padlock didn't come off by itself," she thought alertly.

The temptation to investigate was too great to resist. She paused at the gate and looked inside the grounds. To her further amazement, she saw the front door open and a workman was removing boards from the downstairs windows.

"Good morning!" said a pleasant voice.

Madge jumped. Turning, she saw a middle-aged, white-haired lady, standing by a mock orange bush slightly to the left of the gate. She was regarding Madge with a kindly smile.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," the latter apologized in embarrassment. "I didn't know anyone was at home. I—"

"I don't wonder at your interest in the place," the lady came quickly to her rescue. "The house has been closed for so many years that it must be a town curiosity. Won't you come in?"

"Oh, I think not," Madge murmured, yet aching to do that very thing. "I don't like to intrude."

"It will be no intrusion I assure you," the other responded warmly. "I was wishing only a moment ago that someone would drop in to visit me. I suppose all my old friends are gone by this time."

She sighed, and Madge saw an expression akin to sorrow cross her face. Immediately she smiled again and opened the gate wider.

"Do come in. The house and grounds are in frightful condition but within a few days I hope to

have them in better shape. Perhaps you will help me with suggestions?"

Madge could not resist such an appeal. Actually, she desired nothing more than an opportunity to talk with the woman, perhaps learning what had brought her to Claymore.

"I'd love to come in," she smiled, passing through the gate, "but I'm not very good at suggestions about gardening. You're—you're the owner, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am Agatha Swenster."

Madge introduced herself. Miss Swenster knew how to place her at ease, and soon she lost all feeling of embarrassment. They wandered slowly about the ruined garden. Mrs. Swenster pointed out various things which she planned to have done.

"It must seem nice to be coming back to your old home," Madge commented politely.

"Yes, in a way it does. A great many memories are associated with this house—some very pleasant, others less so. Now that I am here again I should like to remain. However, I fear it is impossible. I am merely putting the place in order before I sell it."

Madge's face disclosed her disappointment. She could not imagine the old mansion in the hands of a ruthless, modern owner who might tear down the shutters, do away with the old-fashioned

garden and relandscape the grounds. It was definitely a house of the past, and Miss Swenster fitted perfectly into the picture.

"I'm not anxious to sell," the owner confessed, "but I have no choice. I plan to hold an auction sale in a few weeks. The house is furnished with really lovely pieces of furniture. I should like to have you see my dishes sometime before the sale."

"What a shame to auction off such valued possessions," Madge said with honest regret. "Aren't you holding anything back?"

"Very little. You see, I must raise money and this house is all I have left."

Apparently realizing that she had paraded her personal affairs, Miss Swenster quickly changed the subject. They continued their tour of the garden, pausing near the sundial. Madge ventured to ask if it had been manufactured special for the Swenster Mansion.

"No, we made it ourselves," she explained. "Father worked out the plans before his death, and an old Negro servant did the actual work later."

She moved hurriedly on, as though not wishing to dwell upon a subject which brought back unhappy associations.

It had occurred to Madge to speak of the recent excavations which had been going on in the garden

but after a moment's consideration she decided to allow the matter to go unmentioned.

She was eager to learn if the man Miss Swenster had engaged to assist with the outside work was the same person she and Cara had observed during their prior visit to the mansion. As Miss Swenster paused to issue orders in regard to trimming the hedge, she had ample opportunity to study the workman's face. She was certain he was not the man she had seen digging in the garden.

"The plot thickens," she thought with quickening interest. "I'll wager Miss Swenster doesn't know any more about that digging than I do. Perhaps if I get a little better acquainted, I'll ask her about it."

Madge readily accepted an invitation to view the inside of the house. Nothing was in order and dust was everywhere. Miss Swenster lifted several white sheets to disclose that they protected really fine mahogany and oak pieces. She did not offer to show Madge the upstairs.

"You see, I have my work cut out for me," she smiled. "I must go over everything, sort out the pieces I mean to keep, and get things generally in order before the auction."

"If you need a woman to help you, I know of an excellent one," Madge offered. "She did work for Aunt Maude."

She noticed Miss Swenster's embarrassed face and realized that she had been tactless.

"I'd like to hire help but I'm afraid I can't afford it," Miss Swenster said quietly. "I am quite strong and will be able to manage alone."

Madge thought Miss Swenster looked frail and scarcely able to do heavy housework. She was tempted to offer her own services gratis but realized that unless she were very diplomatic, Miss Swenster would be certain to refuse.

"I'll find some way to help her with the work," she told herself as she departed a few minutes later. "I know Cara will be glad to do what she can too. And if we should happen to learn something pertaining to the lost Swenster pearls—well, there's no harm in killing two birds with one stone!"

CHAPTER VII

The Inside Story

IN THE end Madge decided that the easiest way to help Miss Swenster would be to disregard propriety and descend boldly upon her. Accordingly, the next morning, which was a school holiday, she and Cara Wayne dressed in their old clothes and armed with brooms and dust cloths, presented themselves at the back door of the mansion.

"We're here to help," they announced blithely. "Please say we may, for we want an excuse to see your dishes and the lovely heirlooms."

They were not certain how this blunt approach would be received, but after the first look of astonishment, Miss Swenster smiled.

"Why, how very thoughtful of you both. I'll be delighted to have you help. Goodness knows there is enough to be done."

They followed her inside. Miss Swenster had straightened the living room but had made no attempt to put other rooms to rights. The girls attacked the work with vigor. It progressed slowly for there was a great deal to be done and

they frequently stopped to examine some object which struck their fancy.

"It's a shame this house has to be sold," Cara declared to her chum. "Miss Swenster doesn't say much about it but you can tell it makes her fairly sick to think of it."

"I know," Madge agreed in an undertone. "I wish we could really do something for her, but I'm afraid we can't."

It was impossible for the girls to work side by side with Miss Swenster and not learn more of her fine character and interesting history. Soon they caught themselves telling her about Skull and Crossbones and Cara's weird experience in connection with the midnight initiation. Miss Swenster expressed an interest in the secret society and did not appear in the least annoyed because they had trespassed. Nor did she seem disturbed to learn of the stranger who prowled about the garden.

"I have no idea who it could have been," she declared. "Perhaps it was only a tramp."

"He was much too well dressed for that," Madge returned. "We thought possibly he might be digging for some treasure that had been hidden on the estate."

Miss Swenster studied the girls quizzically. Her eyes twinkled.

"Dear me, I only wish there were a lost treasure! I am afraid you girls have been listening to wild stories. The Swensters were never as wealthy as townfolks thought."

"Then it wasn't true about the pearl necklace?" Cara asked in disappointment.

"I'm not sure. I never saw the pearls myself, but according to the family legend, they did exist. I suppose you know the story?"

The girls shook their heads, waiting eagerly. At last they were to hear the true account of what became of the famous pearls!

"I'm not sure that I believe this myself," Miss Swenster warned, "but at least the story was handed down to me. As you may know, the pearls were willed to my mother, Rose Swenster. That was her maiden name, of course. She married young and was divorced soon after my birth. She took back her maiden name and I always used it too.

"But to return to the pearls. My mother never had them. Her sister, Florence, felt that she had been cheated in the will. She was so beside herself that she actually hid the pearls, saying that if she could not have them, they should never be worn by my mother."

"How mean!" Cara exclaimed.

"Perhaps the story isn't true," Miss Swenster

smiled. "My mother never mentioned the pearls to me. I learned the tale from the nursemaid who cared for me after Mother's death."

"And Florence never told where she hid the pearls?" Madge probed.

"No, a short time later she fell ill. When she realized she could not get well, she tried to tell what she had done with the pearls, but failed."

"No one had the slightest hint what became of them?" Cara questioned.

"According to the story, I believe an old Negro caretaker was supposed to know something about it. His name was George Andrew Jackson. He must have been seventy at the time Florence died. At any rate he was very forgetful and either would not or could not tell what became of the pearls."

"Was a search never made?" Madge inquired.

"Oh, dear me, yes. Every inch of the house was gone over and the grounds were carefully searched. As a child, I used to think perhaps I could restore the Swenster fortunes. 'Hunt the pearls' was our favorite game."

It struck Madge and Cara that their interest in the lost necklace was not very original. They harbored secret hopes of locating the pearls and had even been guilty of trying to connect Miss Swenster's loss with the mysterious excavations

of the midnight prowler. They were unwilling to believe that the story was pure legend. And the fact that two generations of Swensters had failed to recover the pearls, could not entirely daunt them.

"I had forgotten the matter until you girls reminded me of it," Miss Swenster remarked. "Years ago, when my John was a little boy—"

She broke off, coloring. Then, apparently thinking that some explanation was expected, she finished lamely:

"John was my adopted son. As a boy, he was interested in the pearls too."

It was the first time she had mentioned the name of her son. The girls realized that Miss Swenster had not intended to speak of him. The words had slipped out unbidden. Even to think of him seemed to distress her, for she quickly changed the subject.

The girls remained for luncheon, helping Miss Swenster prepare it. They worked through to four o'clock and as they left for their homes, asked if they might come again.

"Of course," she assured them, "although I can't see what fun you get out of working. If I could pay you—"

The girls hastily explained that they did not want pay. They really had enjoyed the day for it was fun to browse about the old mansion.

"And do you mind if we look around for those

pearls?" Madge inquired. "In sorting out things we might stumble upon them."

Miss Swenster smiled at her enthusiasm.

"Search anywhere you wish, but don't be too disappointed if you fail."

The girls had a great deal to talk over as they walked slowly toward their homes. They were very tired but the day had been a highly satisfactory one. The prospect of roaming over the old mansion at will was very alluring. Already Madge had several places in mind where she thought possibly they might find the missing pearls.

"How fine it would be if we could find the necklace before the mansion is sold," Cara mused. "Then Miss Swenster could go on living there."

"Perhaps she wouldn't care to. When she left here eight years ago, she must have had a reason other than financial for closing up the house. I suppose it was on account of her adopted son."

"What do you imagine he did that turned her against him?"

"I have no idea. He must have done something disgraceful. I'd like to know what it was, but of course, we must never ask."

The girls had every intention of returning to the old mansion the next night after school. In planning their search for the missing pearls, they did not overlook the garden.

"I feel there's something valuable buried near the fountain or the sundial," Madge declared. "It may not be the pearls but at least it's worth investigating. So tomorrow bring your father's spade and we'll do a little digging of our own!"

CHAPTER VIII

A Face Dishonored

IT WAS only natural that Madge and Cara, sharing their delightful secret, should seek each other's company, somewhat to the exclusion of other friends. They did not mean to be aloof, but always there were many private matters which they wished to discuss. In school they passed a great many notes and one of these, which read: "Did you get the spade?" was accidentally intercepted by Enid Burnett who thought it intended for her. The message caused her considerable wonderment. At recess she managed to corner Madge.

"What on earth are you two up to?" she demanded suspiciously. "Have you gone in for gardening?"

"Oh, in a way," Madge evaded.

Until they had a real story to relate, she and Cara preferred to keep the other members of Skull and Crossbones in the dark concerning their activities. To tell their friends immediately might subject them to an unmerciful teasing. Nevertheless, Enid and Jane were not to be hoodwinked so

easily. They guessed that they were being excluded from some secret, and as school was dismissed, stationed themselves at the front door ready to waylay their friends.

Madge and Cara had been anticipating such a move, and quietly slipped out the back way.

"A secret isn't a secret if too many are in on it," Madge defended their action. "We can tell them later on, but for a few days let's keep it to ourselves."

Cara had hidden the spade in the high weeds of a vacant lot not far from the Swenster mansion. They rescued it and proceeded to their destination, not at all disturbed by the curious stares focused upon them by persons they met on the street.

After securing permission from Miss Swenster, they went immediately to the garden. They took turns digging, investigating all the filled holes near the fountain and sundial. Finding nothing, they carefully replaced all soil turned up.

"Well, you can't make me think that man was digging just for the exercise," Madge fretted.

"Perhaps he found what he was after," Cara suggested pessimistically. "In that case we're only wasting our time."

Miss Swenster presently came out to watch the girls.

"Such ambition!" she marveled. "When you

have finished, I want you to come inside and have some of the chocolate cake I baked this afternoon."

After another fifteen minutes had elapsed, the girls decided they were doing entirely too much damage to the garden, and abandoned their project for the day. After such backbreaking work it was pleasant to sit in the comfortable living room, sipping hot chocolate and nibbling at Miss Swenster's delicious cake.

"Nearly all the work is done now except that I must pack small articles in boxes," their hostess told them. "The dishes must be sorted too." She sighed. "It hurts to see everything go but I do hope the auction will be well attended."

Madge and Cara eagerly offered to help with the packing, and after a polite protest, Miss Swenster agreed that they might. It was too late to work that afternoon but they promised to appear early Saturday morning.

The two intervening days passed slowly. At nine o'clock on the morning of the third, the girls presented themselves again at the mansion. They found Miss Swenster sorting out old photographs.

"It's very trying to decide which ones I must throw away," she told them. "I'd like to save them all but I can't."

The girls expressed interest in the photographs and Miss Swenster showed them the picture of

her mother, and of Florence Swenster. In looking at the youthful, sweet faces of the two sisters, it was difficult for Madge and Cara to realize that they could ever have been jealous rivals. They rapidly ran through the other photos, laughing at ridiculous poses or dresses that were amazingly old fashioned.

After they had finished looking at pictures, they set to work packing dishes. It gave them a genuine thrill to handle the choice pieces of porcelain and china.

"I haven't done anything to the study yet," Miss Swenster told them a little later. "I must get at that room as soon as we finish the dishes."

Presently she went upstairs on an errand. Before she returned, the girls packed the last dish. The study door was open and after waiting a few minutes they decided to see what must be done there.

They saw that the walls were lined with books which required packing. Coverings had not been removed from the furniture.

"Look!" Madge exclaimed suddenly.

Cara turned to see her chum regarding an object above the old secretary. It was a picture, and most strangely, its face was turned toward the wall!

"What do you make of that?" Madge whispered. "The other pictures aren't this way."

"Let's see what it is!"

"Perhaps we shouldn't."

However, the temptation was too great. Cara turned the picture over. A handsome young boy with round, full cheeks, twinkling eyes and a cropped head of golden curly hair, gazed down from the frame.

"Who can it be?" Cara murmured.

Before Madge could reply, they heard footsteps on the stairway. A moment later, Miss Swenster entered the study.

"All through with the dishes?" she asked cheerfully. "My, but you are fast—" Her voice trailed off and her entire body seemed to stiffen. She had noticed the picture on the wall.

She murmured something which the girls did not catch. Crossing the room, she removed the picture from its hook, and carried it from the study. The girls heard her mounting the stairs.

For a moment they were too dumbfounded to speak. Then Madge exclaimed:

"That's what we get for our ill bred curiosity! We've offended her terribly. It must have been her son."

Cara nodded miserably.

"The only thing we can do is to apologize."

They spent an unhappy fifteen minutes waiting for Miss Swenster to return. Madge was on the

verge of suggesting that it might be better for them to leave, when she appeared. She smiled brightly as if nothing had happened, but they could see she had been crying.

"We're terribly sorry," Madge began contritely. "We didn't mean to be prying. It was simply inexcusable of us to touch the picture."

"I understand. It was nothing you did that affected me. Please, if you don't mind, let's not mention it again."

Miss Swenster was especially nice to the girls after that but the incident could not be forgotten in an instant. She made no further mention of cleaning the study and Madge and Cara carefully avoided the subject. They could tell that Miss Swenster was still upset. A half hour later they made an excuse for leaving.

"Do come again," she urged. "I know I've been very inhospitable. If you don't come back I'll feel that I've driven you away."

The girls were rather silent as they walked thoughtfully along the street. It was as if a measure of Miss Swenster's unhappiness had fallen upon their shoulders.

"I feel so sorry for her," Madge said after a time. "She's made an idol of that boy. And he's brought her nothing but unhappiness."

Cara glanced quickly at her friend.

"Do you know that for sure?"

Madge nodded.

"Yes, I intended to tell you the first thing today, but it slipped my mind. I found out through Uncle George what her son had done to disgrace the family. And when you hear the story, you'll not blame Miss Swenster for turning his face to the wall!"

CHAPTER IX

The Mahogany Desk

THE girls had reached the Wayne home. It was nearly supper time but Cara would not allow Madge to escape without relating all there was to know concerning Miss Swenster's adopted son. They sat down on the front steps.

"Last night I asked Uncle George if he knew why John Swenster left town," Madge explained. "Of course, it was a wild shot in the dark, for I never dreamed he could tell me. Well, it seems he was one of the few persons in Claymore who really knew the inside story."

"What luck! Tell me what he said."

"It seems that the boy never did amount to a great deal. He must have had bad heredity. Anyway, Miss Swenster took him from an orphan's home. She gave him every advantage, sending him away to school and later trying to establish him in business."

"That's probably where a lot of her money went," Cara observed sagely.

"Yes, she wasted plenty on him. He never ap-

preciated it. He was always getting into one scrape or another. Then one day he up and forged a check for over a thousand dollars! Uncle George was a director in the First National bank where the matter came up. That's how he happened to know all about it."

Cara looked aghast at the news.

"And did they send him to prison?"

"No, Miss Swenster offered to pay the amount of the forged check, and the person whose name had been used, agreed not to prosecute. Her son left town and soon after that Miss Swenster closed up the old mansion."

"I suppose it broke her heart to have him turn out so badly," Cara mused. "And when she was having financial troubles of her own it must have been hard for her to raise the money."

"Yes, it was unfortunate all around," Madge agreed, getting up from the steps. "I must dash home now or I'll be late for supper. See you tomorrow."

The girls did not go to the Swenster mansion the following day or the next. Their evenings were spent cramming for month-end examinations which always were a trial, even to Madge who stood high in her classes.

Then one day, the girls noticed a brief advertisement in the daily paper, announcing that on the

tenth of October, the Swenster mansion and all its furniture would be sold at public auction. It reminded them that if they intended to make another search for the missing pearls, they must be about it.

Saturday morning found them on their way to the mansion. It was a crisp, fall day, the first really cold one of the season. Madge's eyes were very bright and she was so gay that she fairly skipped along the street.

"What ails you?" Cara demanded. Then as she noticed a white envelope protruding from her friend's sweater pocket: "Ha! I'll bet a cent it's from that ranger of yours up at Loon Lake! He writes you twice a week, doesn't he?"

"He does not!" Madge denied, blushing furiously. "Jack has more important things to do than write letters."

"Oh, you needn't pretend, Madge Sterling. You know you like him. That's why you'll not even look at any of the boys here in Claymore."

"Certainly I like Jack. Why shouldn't I? He's a good friend and—"

She looked somewhat nettled as Cara burst forth in a gale of exaggerated laughter.

"All right, laugh! But unless I'm most horribly mistaken I saw you in Rexall's Drug Store last night lapping up a soda and listening moon-eyed while Fred King gave a running report of last

week's football game. You—who can't be dragged near the stadium!"

"I only try to be a polite listener," Cara said cheerfully. "Let's call it quits."

They smiled, and linking arms, hurried on to the mansion. Miss Swenster was delighted to see them again for she had begun to fear that she had offended them during their last visit.

"I'm so glad you came," she greeted them. "After today, everything will be turned topsy-turvy since the furniture must be arranged for the sale."

Miss Swenster spoke cheerfully of the approaching auction, but the girls realized that she was hiding her real feelings. In little ways, more by look and gesture than by words, she had disclosed that she disliked to see her old home sold.

There really was no immediate work to be done save dusting, which Miss Swenster declared unnecessary. However, the girls armed themselves with dust cloths and roamed about over the house.

"We'll do more looking than dusting," Madge assured Miss Swenster. "This may be our last chance to search for the pearls. Wouldn't it be grand if we found them?"

"It would be marvelous! But I really have no faith that you'll locate them. As I said before, I

fear you're searching for something that never existed."

"There's one place we haven't looked," Madge said, "and that's the attic. May we go up there?"

"Of course. I was cleaning out some of the rubbish today, but the old furniture is still there. The pieces are really worthless and I doubt if I'll even put them up at the sale."

The girls were moving up the stairway, when Miss Swenster called them back.

"Oh, one thing more. Your prowler has returned. Last night I heard a noise in the garden. I went to the window just in time to see a man hurrying out the back gate."

"Weren't you afraid?" Cara asked.

Miss Swenster shook her head. "No, only curious. I can't imagine what he can be after. If I see him again, I shall call the police."

After asking a few questions, the girls went on upstairs to the attic. It was a large, roomy affair with only one small window high above their heads.

"Ug!" Cara emitted as she brushed against a cobweb. "I don't care for this place."

She became more enthusiastic as she noted an interesting array of boxes, old chests, and discarded furniture. It was fun to dig into things. Madge discovered a Paisley shawl which she in-

sisted was a treasure and Cara found a beautiful woven coverlet stored away with old clothing. But there was not so much as a clue to the whereabouts of the Swenster pearls.

At last, grimy and tired, the girls returned to the living room, bearing their plunder.

"I had even forgotten I owned such things," Miss Swenster declared when they showed her the shawl and the coverlet. "My grandmother wove that spread herself. And the shawl was brought over to this country so many years back that I've forgotten the exact date. Dear me, how I shall hate to dispose of them."

"Must you?" Madge asked.

"I can't very well keep them. I have saved out so many treasures now that I'll not have places to store them. I know! You girls must accept them as gifts! I'll give Madge the shawl and Cara the coverlet."

Miss Swenster refused to listen to their protests. In the end they thanked her profusely for the generous gifts, promising they would take good care of them. Both were proud to own such treasures. They were eager to return home to display their prizes, but first they insisted upon doing the dusting which they had started hours before.

Miss Swenster again assured them it was un-

necessary. Nevertheless, they went about it in business-like fashion, working vigorously. Soon only the study remained.

"Shall we dust in there?" Madge inquired, not wishing to repeat the mistake previously made.

"Why, yes, if you like," Miss Swenster returned with only the slightest hesitation.

Entering the study, the girls looked with one accord toward the place where John Swenster's picture had hung. A bright square of wallpaper marked the former spot. Miss Swenster had not replaced the picture.

"I wonder what she did with it?" Cara whispered.

Madge shook her head, raising a finger to her lips in mute warning that Miss Swenster could easily hear from the next room.

They silently went about the dusting, bent upon getting it done as quickly as possible. Cara directed her attention to the bookcases while Madge made an attack upon the paneled mahogany desk. She dusted the top and polished off the curved legs. Then her cloth swept across one of the panels.

Madge heard a sharp click. To her amazement, the panel dropped down, revealing a small opening!

CHAPTER X

The Secret Compartment

"WELL, blow me down!" Madge exclaimed, relapsing into comic-strip slang as she always did when greatly excited. "A spring panel!"

Cara had rushed to her side and was staring wide-eyed at the secret compartment revealed in the desk.

"There's something inside!" she cried. "Oh, I hope it's the pearls!"

Madge thrust her hand into the dark opening. Her face brightened as she felt something not unlike a leather jewel case. She brought it to light, holding it up.

"Oh!" Cara exclaimed in disappointment. "It's nothing but an old book."

"A diary," Madge corrected. "Well, I guess it was too much to expect that we'd find the pearls. I suppose Miss Swenster knows about this compartment but let's ask her."

They stepped to the door and called. Miss Swenster answered from the kitchen, and later entered the study, wiping her hands on her apron.

"Look what we found in the desk," Madge said, handing her the diary. "I must have touched a hidden spring when I was dusting. The panel fell down to reveal this."

Miss Swenster moved quickly to the desk, her face showing that the information astonished her.

"I never dreamed there was a secret compartment," she said. "This desk belonged to Florence Swenster, you know."

"Then the diary may have been hers too," Madge observed.

Miss Swenster opened the little book and quickly ran through the yellowed pages. The writing was cramped and difficult to read.

"Yes, this is Florence's diary, I am sure of it. I have seen her writing on a number of old letters."

"I wonder why she hid her diary in such a strange place?" Cara mused.

"Oh, I imagine it was just a girl's desire for privacy," Miss Swenster returned. "Florence was a queer one in a good many ways though. I'm sure she never told anyone about this secret compartment."

She bent to examine it again. She closed the panel, hearing it click as it went firmly into place. But try as she would, she could not open it again.

"I think I can," Madge offered. "I know about where my hand was when it touched the spring."

Miss Swenster stepped aside and Madge moved her hand over the panel exploring its surface. At first she had no better success, then her fingers pressed the spring in just the right manner and the panel popped open.

"It takes a sideways pressure," she explained.

Cara and Miss Swenster both experimented until they had learned the secret. In the meantime, Madge had picked up the diary and was studying it curiously.

"I wonder—could Florence have written anything in here about the pearls?"

Miss Swenster regarded Madge with frank admiration and approval. At first she had thought the search for the pearls only a useless, amusing whim of the girls. Now she recognized that a sound idea lay behind Madge's investigation.

"Why not read the diary?" she asked. "If Florence had any secrets to hide, it's time they were aired."

This suggestion suited the girls admirably. Immediately forgetting their intention to return home early, they dropped down on the black plush settee and were soon lost to the world. Miss Swenster went quietly back to the kitchen.

It was almost impossible at first to make out the cramped, fine writing. The girls laboriously studied out several paragraphs which were dis-

appointingly trite. Florence had recorded in detail her trips to the dressmakers, visits with relatives and parties attended.

Madge and Cara were becoming discouraged when they happened upon the first notation concerning the necklace. It read:

"I attracted unusual attention tonight when I wore the pearls to the Alstone's ball. How Rose envied me!"

Cara gave a little squeal of delight and hugged her chum.

"There's our proof that the pearls really did exist. The necklace wasn't a myth as so many folks thought!"

"I hope she tells what became of it. Read on!"

For another half hour they delved into the diary, finding little of interest to reward their patience. Then they turned a page and read a brief item disclosing that Florence's jealousy of her sister was growing more bitter.

"Rose is very sly," she had written. "She is ingratiating herself with father, hoping that he will will her the pearls."

"She must have had a distorted view of things," Cara observed. "From all that we've heard, Rose wasn't a bit designing."

Madge had turned on ahead in the diary. She gazed at her chum with startled eyes.

"Why, that's almost the last notation. See all these blank pages."

"Just when it became interesting," Cara wailed.

"We're not quite through. There are a few more paragraphs scattered through the diary."

She swiftly turned the pages. Cara leaned closer as they came to one brief sentence. It read:

"Father died today."

For a full minute, the girls stared at the notation, trying to make more of it. Then Cara burst out:

"Wouldn't you think she'd have written more about a thing like that? Not a word of his sickness or anything. While she'd fill page after page with drivel."

"Perhaps she was too moved about his death."

"Maybe," Cara acknowledged doubtfully. "I'd quicker think she was worrying about the pearls."

Before they could read on, Miss Swenster came into the study to say that luncheon was ready. The girls sprang guiltily to their feet, declaring that they could not stay.

"It's all right," their hostess assured them, smiling. "I've already telephoned to your homes. And everything is on the table."

Miss Swenster was an excellent cook, and Madge and Cara who had healthy, growing appetites, did justice to her fine luncheon. However,

they were so excited over the diary that had they eaten bread and milk, they would not have noticed. All during the meal they chattered gaily, telling Miss Swenster everything they had discovered.

"We scarcely can wait until we read the rest," Cara laughed. "Oh, I'm just sure Florence will tell what she did with the pearls."

Miss Swenster had tried hard not to allow the enthusiasm of her young friends to carry her away, but her cheeks were flushed and her eyes brighter than the girls had even seen them. She fairly beamed as she urged them to second helpings.

"I'll not count on the pearls until I see them," she said. "But, oh! What wouldn't I do if they should turn up!"

Cara and Madge glanced at her with curious interest.

"Just what would you do?" Madge asked.

"First, I'd reward you girls for finding them! Then I'd call off that sale. I'd get a gardener again and have this place restored to its former condition. Oh, I would do so many things."

It was the tone of Miss Swenster's voice that told Madge and Cara exactly how deep was her feeling for the old mansion. She had arranged her sale with business-like indifference to sentiment, but underneath, it hurt.

Madge made a silent resolution that she would

never give up until the pearls were found. Surely, the old diary would furnish the clue she needed!

The girls helped with the dishes. The instant they had stacked them away, they hurried back to the study, burying themselves again in the diary.

"We're nearly at the end," Madge warned. "Hold your breath and hope."

She turned several blank pages, and then in an awed voice read aloud:

" 'It was unfair of my father to will the pearls to Rose, though the action did not surprise me greatly. I am determined she never shall wear them! If I cannot have them myself, then I shall hide them where they never will be found.' "

"Oh!" Cara breathed. "How mean!"

"Listen!" Madge commanded, reading on: " 'I have taken only old Uncle George into my confidence and he has sworn that he will never tell. Last night, when everyone was abed we hid the pearls in the—' "

"Go on! Go on!"

"That's the end of the page."

In her eagerness, Madge fumbled the sheets. At last she managed to get the page turned over, but as she stared down, she uttered a startled gasp.

"It's missing! The page that told about the pearls has been torn out!"

CHAPTER XI

The Torn Page

"IF THAT isn't the last straw!" Cara exclaimed indignantly. She permitted herself one glance at the place where the page had been torn from the diary and sank limply back against the settee. "After keying myself up to hear the grand solution, the whole thing falls flat!"

"I feel like wilted spinach myself," Madge admitted. She closed the diary with an impatient snap, placing it on the table. "Well, we're at the end. The page that was torn out, was the last one."

"It would be," Cara groaned. "Our chance of helping Miss Swenster has gone glimmering."

"What do you guess became of the missing page?"

"Probably Florence tore it out herself and burned it up."

Madge agreed that the theory was a likely one. However, she suggested that some other person might have taken the page. The thought left her even more depressed, for in that case, it was likely

that whoever had learned the hiding place, had long ago taken the pearls.

The girls were so thoroughly disheartened that it was some time before they summoned courage to report their failure to Miss Swenster. Her face fell at the news but she tried not to show how keen was her disappointment.

"At any rate, I owe you both a great deal for your interest in the matter."

Before leaving the mansion, Madge asked permission to take the diary home for a few days. In their haste to reach the end, the girls had not read every paragraph but had skipped those that looked uninteresting. Madge had little hope that she would find any new material, but at least thought it would do no harm to reread the diary at her leisure.

"You never admit defeat, do you?" Cara asked as they walked home together. "As far as I'm concerned, I consider the adventure washed-up."

"I haven't completely given up," Madge returned. "But I must confess I haven't a tangible clue."

She did not have time to reread the diary that night, and in truth, she rather dreaded the ordeal. It was a long tedious task, one that offered slight hope of success. Nevertheless, Madge continued to think of the Swenster pearls and to wonder if

she had not overlooked some hitherto unimportant clue.

"In the diary Florence said that she had taken old Uncle George Jackson into her confidence. Why didn't I think to ask Miss Swenster who she meant?"

This seemed such an oversight that Sunday afternoon she dropped around at the mansion.

"Uncle George?" Miss Swenster repeated, in response to her question. "Why, he was the old negro caretaker I told you about. You can't hope to learn anything from him for he has been dead years and years. In fact, his son is an old man now. Or was the last time I heard. He too may be dead by this time."

Madge came to life at this scrap of information. Instantly it flashed through her mind that possibly Uncle George Jackson's son might know something of the pearls.

"Can you tell me his name?" she questioned eagerly.

"Uncle George's son? Why, it must have been Ross. Yes, that was it. Ross Jackson."

Miss Swenster knew very little concerning either the old caretaker or his son. When she had left Claymore eight years before, Ross Jackson had been living in a shack down by the railroad tracks but she did not know what had become of him.

"I should have looked after him," she said regretfully. "I always intended to, but I have had very little ready money. Now that he is an old man it must be difficult for him to find work. I wish I could afford to employ him."

Madge went away with the avowed intention of discovering what had become of old Uncle Ross Jackson. His name was not in the telephone or city directories. She inquired of any number of persons without success.

Then Jane Allen came to the rescue. Among others, Madge had asked her if she had ever heard of the old negro. At the time, Jane could not help her, but she had inquired of their negress wash woman and had learned the location of Uncle Ross' cabin.

"You're welcome to the information, but I'd not advise you to be going down there by the tracks alone," Jane warned. "I can't imagine what's gotten into you lately. You're so quiet and secretive. Always wanting to know such odd things too!"

Madge did not enlighten her as to what had caused the change, though she was tempted to disclose everything. She knew that Jane and Enid both were somewhat hurt because they felt they were being excluded from something. She must make it up to them later.

Madge had no intention of venturing alone down into the slum district of Claymore. She broached the subject of the trip with Cara who was willing to accompany her when she comprehended that the visit might have an important bearing on the missing pearls.

Monday night after school, Madge borrowed her uncle's car and they set forth upon their quest. The house they sought was set well back from the road. They parked the car and walked toward a dilapidated shack with a caved-in roof. The place seemed deserted save for a Plymouth Rock hen which fussed busily over her downy brood and a lank, hungry-looking hound that lay on the doorstep with eyes half closed as if he were dreaming of some exciting coon hunt of a long departed day when both he and his master were younger.

Cara was afraid of the hound and though he scarcely looked in her direction, held timidly back. Madge went boldly to the door and knocked. There were stirrings within and presently Uncle Ross came to the door, knuckling his eyes as if he had been aroused from a nap, which indeed he had.

"Howdy, Miss, howdy," he said to Madge and smiled at Cara. "Won't you step right in—dat is, if you can find a groove to walk in with all this dishevelment."

The girls returned the greeting, suggesting that

they all sit under a tree in the front yard where Uncle Ross had provided a bench for smoking and resting purposes.

"Uncle," Madge began when they were seated, "I have been told that your father was a caretaker at the old Swenster place years ago."

" 'Deed he was, chile. He's tole me dat many a time. 'Sides dat, I used to live dere myself when I was a boy."

"Do you remember that your father ever mentioned anything about the family pearls?" Madge inquired, watching him closely. "I mean the ones that were lost."

"Oh, dem pearls! I used to hear heaps about 'em but dey just faded out wid de years. Sometimes I thinks dey neveh was any pearls—just ghost pearls dat went up in smoke if dey eveh was any such-like jewels in de family."

"But can't you recall anything your father ever said about where he thought they had been hidden?" Madge persisted.

Uncle Ross scratched his white wool, assuming a pose of deep reflection.

"Mah ole memory is full o' holes now, Miss. It was so long ago dat de ole haid has lost its grip."

"But try and think, Uncle! What were your father's duties about the place. He was a gardener for one thing, wasn't he?"

"Yes, Miss. De ole man was one of de expertest gardeners in dis town. Dey wasn't anotheh family in dis whole town dat had a garden like dem Swenster folks—roses a ramblin' around over de walls and honeysuckles loaded down wid hummin' birds. Dey don't have no more quality white folks dese days, no suh!"

"But Uncle," Madge insisted, smiling at the implication of her own social status. "Surely you remember something your father said about the pearls. Maybe just a few words or even one word."

Uncle Ross reflected deeply again and then replied:

"I does remembeh dat de ole man was powerful wurrit 'bout what happened to dem pearls. Fust place, he was 'fraid folks would say *he* stole 'em and he was de honestest culled man in dis town. Yes, suh! Why, de ole man was a Deacon in de church and de ministeh used to say—"

Madge saw he was going off on a new tangent so tried to draw him up.

"Yes, yes, Uncle. No one ever thought your father took the pearls. All we want to know is if you recall anything he ever said about where he thought they might have been hidden."

The old negro reflected deeply.

"Well, Miss, I does remembeh dat when de ole

man was in dis here very same house a passin' on to de otheh shore and sort of talkin' wild-like jest before he died, he said somethin' about de pearls. And den he said another word. Let me think. What was it he said?"

While the girls waited patiently, hoping that he would be able to furnish the clue they needed, Uncle Ross seemed to lose control of his briefly gathered memories. Madge could almost see them slipping away.

"Think hard, Uncle," she urged. "What was the word?"

Uncle Ross made one last grand effort to remember. He closed his eyes, shaking his head in a baffled sort of way.

Then speaking very slowly, as though probing his memory almost beyond its powers, he said:

"Seems to me, Miss, he said somthin' about de sun. No, dat wasn't it neither. It was sun—"

"Not *sundial,*" Madge supplied eagerly.

Uncle Ross' dark face brightened and he slapped his thigh a resounding whack.

"Dat was it! De word de ole man said was sundial!"

CHAPTER XII

Uncle Ross' Hint

CARA and Madge questioned Uncle Ross further, trying ineffectually to bring out additional information. The old Negro had scraped his memory bare and could recall nothing more concerning the pearls. The girls presently thanked him and in turning to leave, Madge handed him a dollar bill.

"Thank you, Miss, thank you," he beamed and bowed.

The girls walked back to the parked car, only moderately pleased at the outcome of the interview.

"Do you think there really is a connection between the pearls and the sundial?" Cara asked somewhat skeptically as they drove away.

"Yes, I do," Madge returned. "Unless Uncle Ross' memory played him false. It's a pretty vague hint, but perhaps we can make something of it."

"Perhaps you can," Cara corrected. "I'm no good at puzzles and this one takes the prize."

Madge soon reached the edge of darktown, taking a main street which led to the better section of Claymore. She drove like an expert automaton, her

eyes glued on the road but her thoughts many miles away. She came to life with a start as the car wheels struck a hole in the pavement.

"Cara, I was just thinking—"

"Please don't or we may end up in a ditch," Cara laughed. "What were you saying?"

Madge scarcely knew how to tell what was in her mind. It seemed reasonable to her that the Swenster pearls might have been hidden in the garden near the sundial. In digging about, the girls had not paid particular attention to the old sundial, but had confined themselves to the general locality disturbed by the prowler. Madge was convinced too that the man they had seen was after the same thing—the Swenster pearls. How he had learned of them she could not imagine.

"Of course, we did do some of our digging near the sundial," she said to Cara, "but at the time we never dreamed there was any connection. Now my idea is to go back there and look over the situation again. It may be that at a certain hour the gnomon casts a shadow at the designated place. I've read of such things in story books."

"But this isn't a story book," Cara protested in a matter-of-fact tone. "It's my personal opinion that the pearls are gone. If they were ever hidden in the garden, that prowler has them by this time! Otherwise, why hasn't he been back?"

"Perhaps he's been afraid. And he did return one night, for Miss Swenster heard him. I wish we could catch him at it and turn him over to the police for questioning."

Although Cara was reluctant to resume excavation activities, she agreed to make one more attempt when Madge promised to do most of the digging. It was too late to go to the Swenster mansion that evening but the following afternoon they went there directly after school.

They set to work with high hopes and soon had excavated a complete circle around the sundial. Dusk found them still digging. Finally, with an exclamation of digust, Madge threw down her spade.

"I've had enough. As far as I'm concerned, the pearls may stay hidden until the end of time!"

"Amen," Cara added fervently. "Just look at the blisters on my hands. And my shoulder muscles are sore already. What will they be like tomorrow?"

"If the way I feel is any indication, we'll both be in the hospital. The next time I get one of my so-called brilliant ideas, I hope you choke me."

"I will," Cara promised gravely.

They filled in the earth they had disturbed and went home in a very ill temper. A hot bath and a warm supper cheered Madge considerably, causing

her to forget her resolution to think no more of the pearls. That very evening she settled herself in an easy chair, determined to reread Florence Swenster's diary.

It was a tiresome ordeal now that the material was no longer novel. Several times Madge yawned wearily and was tempted to switch to a popular magazine.

"This is absolutely our last hope," she told herself, gazing thoughtfully at the little leather book in her hand. "Miss Swenster's auction sale will be held in a few days now, and after the place is sold, it will be too late to help her. I suppose I'm crazy to keep kidding myself we may find the pearls—especially, after our experience today. Just the same I can't help feeling that I've overlooked some important clue."

She yawned again and went back to her reading.

"This will never do!" she chided herself. "My mind isn't on it at all."

She turned another page, read a few paragraphs which she remembered perfectly. Then, unexpectedly, her eye fastened upon a notation which she and Cara had skipped during the first reading of the diary. It was not particularly startling, merely reading:

"Uncle George is to mix cement for the new sundial tomorrow."

Madge stared at it long and thoughtfully. She felt it must have more significance than was apparent. She began to recall scraps of information, previously gleaned. Why had Florence Swenster taken Uncle George into her confidence in regard to the hiding of the pearls? It was unlikely that she would trust such knowledge to him unless she had need of his help.

She looked at the date of the notation to compare it with the day Florence had recorded that she had hidden the pearls.

"According to this diary, Uncle George must have been making the sundial on the very day that the pearls were disposed of!" she thought, with growing excitement. "And Uncle Ross said his father mentioned the sundial. Oh, there's a very significant connection!"

Madge knew that she was on the verge of making an important deduction, but try as she would she could not solve the enigma. For fifteen minutes she sat staring thoughtfully into space, trying to work her way through the maze.

Then like a flash, the answer came. She sprang to her feet, her face jubilant.

"How stupid of me not to think of it before! We've had the clue all the time and didn't know it! Tomorrow, if I can convince Miss Swenster to my way of reasoning, I'll lead her to the pearls!"

CHAPTER XIII

The Stranger

MADGE waylaid Cara the following evening after school, fairly dragging her down the street, so great was her hurry to get away from the building.

"We're going straight to the mansion," she announced impressively.

Cara threw up her hands in a gesture of hopeless despair and stopped dead in her tracks.

"Another brilliant idea! I see it coming on. Remember, you told me to choke you if you ever had one again!"

Madge laughed.

"This idea is different and it doesn't involve any digging. It's worse than that! I'm afraid Miss Swenster won't consent. You must help me convince her."

In spite of herself, Cara's curiosity was aroused.

"Convince her of what?"

"Come on," Madge ordered, catching her by the hand and pulling her along. "There isn't time to explain now. You'll hear everything when we reach the mansion."

Miss Swenster received them with her usual cordiality. Madge was so excited that as she plumped herself down on the sofa, it was difficult for her to begin. Briefly, she reviewed the facts already known to Miss Swenster and Cara, then disclosed the new notation she had found in the diary. She was a little disappointed to observe that neither appeared greatly impressed.

"I don't see just what you have in mind," Miss Swenster confessed.

"Simply this! Uncle George Jackson had a hand in hiding the pearls. We know the sundial had something to do with it too. Now, since the pearls were hidden on the very day that the old negro was mixing cement for the sundial, it's my contention that the necklace was hidden *inside* it, probably in the pedestal!"

For a full minute, Miss Swenster digested this in silence. Then she said quietly:

"It's an interesting theory at least."

Madge cast a glance of despair at Cara. Everything depended upon Miss Swenster's enthusiastic acceptance of the idea. She was even more discouraged to see that her chum regarded her somewhat skeptically.

"Oh, I can tell you both think it's another silly idea. But you must admit it's logical. If only we could have the sundial opened, I know we'd find

the pearls!" She arose, feeling that it was useless to add more. Although Miss Swenster had said little, Madge could tell that she did not care to have the sundial broken. Nor could she really blame her for the dial was a beautiful piece of work.

"Wait!" Miss Swenster said firmly. "There may be something in what you say. At least, we'll find out."

"You mean we may have the sundial cracked open?" Madge demanded eagerly.

Miss Swenster nodded.

"Yes, shall we go to the garden now and see what must be done to remove the pedestal?"

She slipped a shawl over her shoulders as a protection against the fall winds and the girls followed her outside.

"It's my opinion the pearls are hidden in the base," Madge declared as they surveyed the sundial speculatively. "But it's a shame to ruin the pedestal unless we're sure. Perhaps if we move it a trifle, we may hear something rattling about inside."

The three placed their shoulders to the pedestal, trying to lift it. The sundial seemed rooted to the ground, so little would it give.

"It's too heavy for us," Miss Swenster said, wiping the dust from her hands. "We must have it cracked open."

"I know a man who is very reasonable in his charges," Madge informed quickly. "Occasionally, he does work for Uncle George."

"Then go for him now if you wish. It grows dark very early these fall days. If we are to accomplish anything today, we must lose no time."

Madge was only too eager to take herself upon the errand. Since Cara, who never enjoyed long walks, preferred to remain at the mansion with Miss Swenster, she started off alone.

Silas Davies was the man she had in mind for the work. He was always glad to pick up odd jobs, and in case the pearls were not found, she thought she could trust him to maintain a discreet silence.

She had forgotten where he lived so stopped at a corner drug store to consult a telephone directory. Finding that the house was only a short distance away, she decided to go there instead of calling.

A few minutes later she knocked at the door of a neat, modest little house on Bancroft Street. A woman answered, and Madge inquired if Mr. Davies was home.

"He's working for Mr. Ruggles today," his wife returned regretfully. "But I'm expecting him home in three quarters of an hour."

"If he's been working all day, I suppose it's too late to get him to come to the Swenster mansion,"

Madge murmured in discouragement. "Miss Swenster had a little job for him—it won't take long but it's dreadfully important that it be done tonight."

"Well, I can't say how tired Mr. Davies will be. He makes a point of not working after five but if it's real urgent he may accommodate you. He'll be at the Ruggles place for another half hour. Why don't you stop there and see what he says?"

Madge thanked Mrs. Davies, deciding to follow the suggestion. It really was urgent that the sundial be investigated that very afternoon. With strangers prowling about the mansion at night, it was not safe to leave anything to chance. If necessary, she was willing to pay Mr. Davies out of her own pocket for the extra service.

She walked hurriedly toward the Ruggles residence, anxiously studying the western horizon where the sun was sinking lower and lower. So absorbed was she in her own thoughts that she failed to observe the approach of a man who walked swiftly, with head low and chin thrust deeply in his coat collar. Inevitably, they collided.

For a brief instant they were face to face. Involuntarily, Madge started, and an exclamation scarcely above a whisper, escaped her.

It was the man she had seen many nights before prowling about in Miss Swenster's garden!

CHAPTER XIV

An Unexpected Meeting

"BETTER watch where you're going!" the man said gruffly.

"I—I beg your pardon," Madge stammered, unable to remove her eyes from his face.

For a moment they continued to stare, then the man moved on. Madge looked after him, trying to gather her scattered thoughts.

"I've seen him before," she told herself tensely. "In Miss Swenster's garden."

Watching the retreating figure, she was convinced she had not been mistaken in her first hasty conclusion. The man was none other than the mysterious prowler. His build was the same; he had a similar way of walking; everything tallied.

"And that's not the only place I've seen him," she thought. "Let me think—"

Before her eyes flashed a mental picture of the photograph she had seen hanging in Miss Swenster's study. She recalled the youthful face, the regular, almost classical features, a head of curly, golden hair.

"He's changed some with the years," she told herself, "but I'll bet a cookie it's John Swenster. I wonder if Miss Swenster knows he's in Claymore?"

Such a possibility seemed remote. Madge knew that Miss Swenster was still so distressed by the memory of her adopted son that his presence in the city was almost certain to disturb her usual calm manner. And during the past few days she had seemed no different than usual.

She wondered what had brought the man to Claymore. It was unlikely he had come to attend the auction sale or to see his mother. His secret trips to the garden suggested a deeper, more selfish purpose.

Madge was inclined to hurry back to the mansion to tell Miss Swenster the startling news. A minute's thought convinced her that such a course would be unwise.

"There's just one chance in a hundred that I'm mistaken," she reasoned. "And if I should tell Miss Swenster her son is here when it's some other person, she might never get over the shock. No, I must be absolutely sure before I say a word to her."

She looked after the retreating figure. He was far up the street, walking swiftly, but she thought she could overtake him.

"I'll follow and see where he goes," she decided.

She soon saw that he was heading toward the business section of Claymore. Rapidly cutting down the distance between them, she then kept just far enough behind to avoid suspicion.

As they reached the downtown section, the stranger walked faster, moving in and out to pass pedestrians hurrying home from work. Madge found it increasingly difficult to keep him in sight.

Then she lost him entirely.

"I don't see where he went unless he dodged in somewhere," she thought.

She gazed in through the window of a drug store but could not locate him. The only other possibility was the Grand Hotel. She went in.

The lobby was crowded. Madge looked carefully about, observing no one who resembled the man she sought.

"I'll see if his name is on the register," she decided.

Before she could transfer the thought to action, an elevator discharged passengers. Several of the men walked toward the main desk. And one of them was the stranger Madge had followed. He did not glance in her direction but moved directly to where the clerk was standing.

Madge slipped behind a pillar and waited.

"I'm checking out early this evening," she heard

him say tersely. "I left my baggage upstairs but I'll not be using the room after six. Please charge me accordingly."

He passed within a few feet of where Madge was standing, and walked out the front entrance.

"At least he'll not be snooping around the mansion any more," she told herself with satisfaction. "And judging from the crabby way he acts, he hasn't been very successful in his mission—whatever it is."

After the man's back had vanished through the revolving doors, she moved over to the desk, asking to see the register. She glanced over the first page of names and turned back. At last she came to it: "John Swenster, Chicago."

"Well, that proves I was right," Madge commented inwardly. "And now the problem is whether or not to tell Miss Swenster."

Emerging from the hotel she was astonished to see how dark it had grown. Consulting her watch, she realized it was too late to find Silas Davies at the Ruggles'. Regretfully, she decided that she must let the work on the sundial go for that night.

"It's supper time now and Miss Swenster and Cara will be wondering what became of me," she thought uncomfortably. "Aunt Maude will be in my wool too if I don't scamper home."

A few minutes later, breathless from hurrying

so fast, she let herself in the front gate of the mansion and rushed up the walk. Cara, who had been watching at a window for the past half hour, flung open the door.

"Where have you been all this time?" she demanded. "Didn't you bring the workman after all?"

"Sorry," Madge apologized, flashing her a significant look which Cara did not understand. "Other matters came up. Anyway, Mr. Davies was working at the Ruggles'. I imagine we can get him tomorrow."

Cara was disappointed and disclosed it. She brightened when Miss Swenster suggested that both girls remain for supper. It was not difficult to persuade Madge, for she felt that she should tell Miss Swenster what she had discovered, and she preferred time to lead up to the matter gradually.

The girls telephoned to their homes, receiving permission to remain. They helped Miss Swenster with the supper, setting the table, and taking great pains with the salad which was their own concoction.

It was nearly seven-thirty when they sat down to dine. For some reason, conversation lagged. Miss Swenster appeared unusually constrained though she made a studied attempt at cheerfulness.

No one ate very much. It was in the minds of all that this likely would be their last supper together. In a few days the mansion would be sold.

"I wish you weren't going away, Miss Swenster," Cara said presently. "It won't seem right for any other person to live in this lovely house."

Miss Swenster smiled, but tears shone in her eyes. She brushed them impatiently away.

"What a sentimental old fool I am! Here I've not lived in this house for eight years but now that I know I'm to lose it, I feel so desolate. It's almost as though I'm losing my last friend."

"You have a great many friends here in Claymore," Madge assured her, "only they're timid about coming to see you. I've heard folks say so."

"I suppose you're right," Miss Swenster agreed slowly. "There was a time when I didn't care to see people. I couldn't bear their sympathy. I drove them away."

She relapsed into a moody silence which neither of the girls ventured to break. Presently, she looked up and smiled apologetically.

"I shouldn't impose my troubles on you. I'm sure that at times my actions must have seemed very queer. I feel I owe you an explanation for certain things which likely are not clear."

"Your past is your own," Madge said kindly.

"Don't tell us anything that you dislike to bring up."

"I feel I must speak of my—my son. It was his picture you saw in the study. I turned it to the wall on the day I closed up the mansion."

Madge and Cara nodded, not wishing to interrupt. They already had guessed this much.

"I found John in an orphan's home. He was nine when I adopted him, and the sweetest boy in the world! Oh, I adored him! But even as a boy he was inclined to get into trouble. He'd take things that didn't belong to him. I couldn't seem to teach him the difference between right and wrong. Oh, I dislike to admit it, but he was willful and he repaid my kindness with indifference.

"I sent him away to school, thinking he might benefit by a change in environment. Once away from my watchful eye, he went from bad to worse. He fell in with the wrong sort of companions. He spent far more money than I could afford to give him. Several times he forged my name to checks.

"Finally, I told him that if he did not straighten up I should disown him. For a time he seemed to do better. I was encouraged. Then he forged another check—this time using the name of a prominent Claymore man. I'll not bore you with the details. It was the end. I sent him away and I've never seen him to this day."

"But you've forgiven him?" Madge asked softly.

Miss Swenster did not reply at once. Then she said:

"I loved John more than any other person in the world, but it was a wasted love. I realize that should I take him back he would only make me unhappy. If he were to step into this house this very night, I'd tell him to go!"

Madge gazed at her queerly.

"You really mean that?"

"Yes, it may sound hard, but I gave twenty years of my life to John. For the first time I am commencing to see him in his true colors, ungilded by my ideals. I can never hope to forget him entirely, but at least his memory becomes more bearable."

Madge was sorely troubled. She had fully intended to tell Miss Swenster that her son was in Claymore. Now it seemed a cruel thing to do. By her own admission, the old lady was gradually casting off unhappy memories which had held her enslaved for so many years. She felt herself sufficiently strong to confront her son, yet Madge wondered. Might not it be better to say nothing? By tomorrow John Swenster would be far away with no one the wiser, providing she kept her own counsel.

She was still turning the matter over in her

mind when they left the supper table. The girls cleared the table and wiped dishes. Madge dropped a plate which fortunately did not break.

"What ails you tonight?" Cara asked. "Are you worrying about that French quiz we had today?"

Madge laughed.

"No, but it might be better if I would worry a little. I flunked it flat I know."

"You always say that, but at the end of the month I notice you manage to squeeze through pretty well at the head of the list!"

They finished drying the dishes and stacked them in the cupboard. Madge was putting away the last plate when she suddenly straightened.

"What was that?"

"I didn't hear anything," Cara returned.

"I thought I heard something fall to the ground. It sounded like it came from the garden."

"You're imagining things," Cara laughed. "Did you hear anything, Miss Swenster?"

"No, I didn't. It might have been a ladder that fell. The man who was working on the house yesterday, left one standing against the eaves."

Madge did not look completely convinced.

"I might just run out and see."

"Don't be a goose!" Cara remonstrated. "I think it was your imagination. We're too far

away from the garden to hear any noise from there. It was probably the ladder."

Madge allowed her chum to drag her into the living room. She went to the window and looked out. It was a black night but had there been a moon she could not have seen the garden for a wing of the house obstructed the view. The wind howled plaintively outside. Miss Swenster thought the room was cold and went to the kitchen for firewood.

They built a cheerful little blaze in the fireplace. Madge and Cara sat on the floor, watching the embers. Presently, Miss Swenster brought in marshmallows which they toasted above the coals.

"Look out!" Cara warned. "Yours is burning, Madge."

Madge flung the charred marshmallow into the fire and abruptly arose. She slipped on her coat.

"Where are you going?" Cara demanded.

"Oh, just out to the garden. I want to satisfy my curiosity. I've had an uneasy feeling all evening."

Cara laughed scoffingly but when she saw her friend was not to be dissuaded, she too arose. Miss Swenster reached for her shawl.

"We may as well all go," she said. "I feel that fresh air would do me good too."

They filed out the front way, Madge leading.

She was the first to reach the garden. Uttering a cry of surprise and alarm, she ran to the sundial.

It lay upon its side and the pedestal had been split from the dial!

CHAPTER XV

The Secret in Stone

"I KNEW it! I knew it!" Madge exclaimed, gazing in dismay at the wreckage. "All evening I felt something like this was about to happen."

"Perhaps the wind blew it over," Miss Swenster said, though her voice disclosed that she had no faith in her own words.

"It would have taken a cyclone to move that heavy sundial," Madge declared. "Someone deliberately cracked it open. See, here's the sledge-hammer he used. I knew I heard some such sound."

"And like as not the pearls are gone!" Cara wailed.

"That's a foregone conclusion," Madge responded. "But we may as well get a light and make a thorough search."

Miss Swenster already had started for the house. She returned a minute later with a flashlight. They turned it upon the dark interior of the broken pedestal and Madge felt around with her hand.

"If the pearls were ever here they're gone now," she announced.

The significance of the discovery was gradually dawning upon her. She knew that it was John Swenster who had been prowling about the garden and now she was convinced that he had broken open the sundial in an attempt to locate the pearls. At the risk of shocking Miss Swenster, she determined to withhold her information no longer.

"Miss Swenster, I should have told you this before," she said quietly. "Your son is in Claymore—has been for days. I learned this afternoon that he had registered at the Grand Hotel."

Miss Swenster's face was hidden by the darkness but the girls saw her figure straighten. She spoke no word and Madge rushed recklessly on:

"Perhaps I ought not to say this, but I discovered that it was he who came here at night."

"The prowler you saw digging here in the garden?" Miss Swenster asked in a tense, unnatural voice.

"Yes."

"Then I think we know what became of the pearls. You should have told me before, Madge."

"I did intend to—but——"

"I understand," Miss Swenster interrupted, "you hoped to spare my feelings. We must try to reach my son at once!"

"He's registered at the hotel, but I'm afraid he may be gone by this time. I heard him say he was checking out early."

"We can't let him get away with the pearls! Come, we'll call a taxi."

They rushed to the house. While Madge and Cara struggled into their wraps, Miss Swenster telephoned the nearest cab agency. In five minutes the taxi was at the door.

"To the Grand Hotel," Miss Swenster directed, "and hurry!"

In the dim light of the cab she looked very pale but determined. She listened quietly as Madge related in detail her experience of the afternoon.

The cab halted in front of the hotel and the doorman assisted them to alight. Telling the driver to wait, the three hurried inside, going directly to the desk.

"We should like to see Mr. Swenster," Madge said. "Is he here?"

The clerk shook his head regretfully.

"Sorry. He checked out some time ago. He went at least a half hour ago, I'd say."

"You don't know where he was going?" Madge demanded eagerly. "It's very important."

"You might inquire of the starter," the clerk suggested. "I believe Mr. Swenster called a taxi."

The three hurried outside again, asking the

same question of the doorman. He did not know Mr. Swenster by name but recalled him from Madge's accurate description.

"If I remember rightly, he went to the Union depot," he informed.

They sprang into the waiting cab, directing the driver to take them to the station.

"Step on it!" Madge ordered.

She glanced at her wrist watch. It was exactly nine-thirty and she knew that an express train left for New York at nine-forty.

"Oh, we'll never make it!" she breathed.

Miss Swenster's lips drew down into a tighter line. Her fingers nervously tapped the car window.

They had three minutes to spare as the cab pulled up to the station. Tumbling out, they started off at a run, unaware of the curious stares directed at them.

Entering the waiting room, they swiftly surveyed it. John Swenster was no where to be seen.

"He's probably on the train by this time!" Cara cried. "And it pulls out in two minutes."

Miss Swenster and Madge dragged her toward the gate. "Tickets!" the gateman said sternly. "You can't go in without—"

The three brushed past him so quickly that he was taken completely by surprise, and could only stare after their retreating backs.

They ran down the platform.

"Look!" Madge cried, pointing to a man ahead. "Isn't that he?"

"Yes, it's John," Miss Swenster murmured.

They touched him on the shoulder just as he was boarding the train. He wheeled and the color drained from his face as he beheld Miss Swenster.

"John—" her voice quavered, then took on a sterner tone. "You must come with me."

He laughed unpleasantly.

"Sorry, but I'm taking this train." He tried to board it but Cara deliberately blocked his way.

"You can't go until you explain a number of things," Miss Swenster said quietly. "And you must give me the pearls!"

"Well, of all the idiotic things! Say, are you trying to create a scene?"

With increasing uneasiness, he surveyed a little group of persons who had gathered on the platform to see what the argument was about. Passengers had thrust their heads curiously from the train windows.

"All aboard!" the conductor called.

"Get out of my way!" John Swenster said harshly, thrusting Cara aside.

Madge darted forward, snatching his suitcase from his hand.

"All right, if you go, you go without your suit-

case! And what's more, we'll have you arrested at the first stop!"

The man faced Madge with smoldering eyes. He saw that he could not retrieve his suitcase without a struggle and the conductor was not in sufficient sympathy to hold the train a minute. Even now it was slowly pulling from the station.

Frantically, he watched the cars moving by. He seemed undecided what to do. Then with a gesture of angry submission, he abandoned all intention of boarding the train.

"Well, now that you've made me miss my train, just what do you want?" he asked unpleasantly, moving toward Madge as if to recover his suitcase.

She backed away.

"Now, John," Miss Swenster said firmly, "unless you wish me to call the police, you must come without making any fuss."

"Where do you expect me to go?" he demanded sullenly.

"To my home. We'll talk matters over there."

"All right," he said suddenly. "I'll check my suitcase and go with you."

"We'll take the suitcase along," Miss Swenster told him.

He looked as though he intended to refuse, but the sight of a policeman moving through the train gate, caused him to change his mind. Madge and

Cara carried the suitcase to a taxi cab, not trusting it in his hands.

"This is an outrage!" John Swenster protested as they drove toward the mansion.

His foster-mother paid scant attention. Not until they were all in the living room of the mansion did she speak her mind.

"John," she said calmly, "I've stood entirely too much at your hands. I've protected you for the last time. Now either give up the pearls or I'll turn you over to the authorities."

"Pearls!" he scoffed. "I don't know anything about your pearls."

"Madge, will you search the suitcase?"

The girls had been waiting for this opportunity. Quickly, while John Swenster looked on furiously, they unstrapped the case and opened it. They lifted out several layers of clothing. In the very bottom, lay an old candy box. Madge shook it. Something rattled. She opened the box.

Inside lay a string of pearls, perfect in shape, skillfully matched—the most beautiful necklace the girls had ever seen.

"The famous old Swenster pearls that were willed to my mother!" Miss Swenster exclaimed. She turned coldly to her adopted son, "And you would have stolen them from me!"

A sudden change had come over the man. At

sight of the pearls which plainly established his guilt, his arrogance departed. He gazed contritely upon his foster mother. Madge instantly divined that he hoped to appeal to her sympathies.

"I would never have touched your pearls only I'm in such desperate need," he whined. "I can't find work. Why, I haven't had a decent meal in weeks. I'm down and out while you have this fine home—everything."

He made a rather appealing figure as he stood there pleading his case. Madge and Cara exchanged uneasy glances. Would Miss Swenster give in to him as she had in the past?

The old lady seemed to waver. Her face softened, then tightened again.

"Don't try your old tactics," she said sternly "I notice that you have good clothing and you had money enough to stay at the Grand Hotel. However, I'll be generous. If you care to make your home here you are free to do so."

He laughed bitterly.

"You think I'd stay in this one-horse town? Not on your life! You must furnish me with money to live in Chicago or New York."

"You'll not get another cent from me—ever!"

John Swenster shrugged his shoulders.

"O.K. Then I'l be ambling along."

"One minute!" Miss Swenster halted him. "I am

letting you off easier than you deserve. By rights I should turn you over to the police."

"Oh, you're being very generous!" he mocked.

"Unless you tell me exactly what motivated your return to Claymore—and a truthful story, mind you—I may change my mind about being so generous!"

John Swenster recognized that she meant what she said. He realized too that her feeling toward him had undergone a change, that he could no longer bend her to his will.

"There's little to tell," he said gruffly. "I was out of money and I thought the pearls might tide me over. I'd have had 'em too if it hadn't been for these girls!"

"How did you learn of the pearls?" Miss Swenster questioned.

"Knew about them when I was a boy. Remember that old desk of yours? Well, it has a secret panel. There's a diary inside that told about the pearls. I tore out one of the pages years ago and then forgot about it."

"Just what did that page say about the pearls?" Madge inquired curiously. "Did it say they were hidden in the sundial?"

"No, it didn't. If it had, I'd have made off with them weeks ago. The only hint I had was that they were hidden somewhere near the sundial.

Like a fool I wasted a lot of time digging up the garden!"

"We saw you," Madge admitted. "But tell us, what brought you here just at this time?"

"It was years ago I learned about the pearls. I tried to locate them at the time but failed. Then I forgot all about it until I learned that Miss Swenster was coming back here to open up the house. I thought I'd get here first and make one more try. I didn't have any luck until it occurred to me that the pearls might have been hidden inside the dial. Tonight I came here, chancing detection, and cracked open the pedestal. I found the necklace inside."

Miss Swenster asked a few more questions before telling her son that he might feel free to go. After he had left, she stood for some minutes at the window, watching his retreating figure. Then she turned back to the girls, and with tears in her eyes thanked them for their aid.

"You have saved my house!" she said. "Finding the pearls means more to me than you'll ever know."

It was so late that Cara and Madge dared linger no longer. However, the following day they were back at the mansion to learn from Miss Swenster that she had called off her auction sale. Already she was making plans to restore the estate to its

former elegance and she had engaged old Uncle Ross as gardener. She told them too, that she had turned over the necklace to a jeweler for an appraisal.

"I don't know its value yet," she declared, "but it will bring more than enough to keep me in my old age. I intend to reward you girls too!"

Madge and Cara demurred and Miss Swenster finally dropped the subject after warning them she would have something more to say when their birthdays arrived. Nevertheless, the girls did have one favor to ask—that they might hold a meeting of Skull and Crossbones at the old mansion.

The very next Saturday Madge and Cara introduced their friends to the delightful estate. They pointed out the broken sundial which Miss Swenster planned to repair, the desk with the secret panel, and told a story which held their friends spellbound.

"You lucky thing," Jane Allen said enviously to Madge. "How do you manage to run into all these entrancing adventures?"

"They seem to run into me," she laughed.

"It's not fair for you to have a corner on all the fun," Enid Burnett complained good naturedly. "We'll not forgive you unless you promise to take us in on your next secret."

"Oh, I shall," Madge returned, "though I can't

say when I'll have another. If only you'd all go North with me next summer, I know I could guarantee real fun and perhaps an adventure."

"Let's take her up on it!" Enid cried.

The girls all laughed for as they sat in the cozy drawing room before the crackling fire, summer seemed a long way off and Canada too far distant to even imagine. Yet, the germ had taken root, and the next year was to see them all in the North Woods with Madge fulfilling her pledge.

THE END